



# A Changing Nation: Issues Facing Chinese Teachers

In the midst of a nation undergoing great change, Chinese teachers encounter new challenges as they face the task of educating the nation's youth.

by **Michael H. Romanowski**

As China charges forward into modernity, the nation is confronted with major economic and social changes. China's one-child policy and economic growth, for example, have altered the values and attitudes of parents, thereby creating new challenges for Chinese teachers. In addition, nontraditional ways of thinking in China's youth have led to a variety of classroom concerns.

What are the particular issues facing Chinese teachers in K-12? Findings from a qualitative study reveal problems teachers face in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

## The Study

At a leading research university in the PRC, students in the School of Education include former teachers studying in the field of education at the doctoral and master's levels. Because of their extensive experiences as both teachers and students in the Chinese education system, these individuals are well-informed about the current conditions of Chinese classrooms.

Focus group interviewing was selected as the optimal research tool for gathering data because these former teachers were graduate students in the same school of education, where they were accustomed to discussing educational concepts and issues and felt comfortable with one another and also the researcher. Group discussion sparked new ideas and thinking, and allowed participants to articulate their arguments. They could seek help from other students to clarify their ideas or to get assistance with particular English words and meanings. Divided into groups of 6-8, participants discussed their views on problems Chinese teachers face. The sample included 24 students (3 doctoral and 21 master's). All four 75-minute group discussions were tape recorded.

Prior to the interviews, a guide was developed. The questions were open-ended, allowing respondents more latitude to share information. The following questions were used in interviews with each focus group:

- What are some of the problems and struggles faced by Chinese teachers?
- What changes have taken place in Chinese society that have directly affected teachers?
- What do you see as possible responses to those problems?
- How do these problems affect students?

Based on the responses, the researcher used probing questions to evoke additional information from the discussion and elicit opinions and the reasoning behind them. As various new topics emerged, these were incorporated into discussions with the other focus groups.

To analyze the information produced through the conversations, the researcher focused on discovering trends, themes, and patterns. Through inductive analysis, various themes emerged from the data and were coded and organized. The information was then sorted according to topics and categories. Pertinent examples and quotes were identified and added to the relevant categories. In what follows, the problems faced by Chinese public school teachers are discussed, centering on three problem areas: China's high-stakes testing program; the changing Chinese student; and the working conditions of public school teachers in the PRC.

## High-Stakes Testing

Chinese education is the epitome of high-stakes testing. Students spend their school life preparing for the ultimate examination—the College Entrance Exam (CEE). Today, the CEE not only grants or denies admission to the university, but students' performance on the exam has a direct impact on their lives. As one participant stated, "If I didn't pass the college entrance exam, I would have no future. I would have to stay at home and farm the land . . . there would be no other opportunities." The powerful CEE determines not only students' education, but the economic and social quality of future lives.

For Chinese teachers, the key issue is that the exam dictates the curriculum; the exam prevents teachers from addressing other knowledge and skills in fear of failing to adequately prepare students. Inevitably, the curriculum is reduced to only what is covered on tests, in turn limiting students' access to knowledge and skills. This intense obsession with testing, especially with the CEE, dictates all

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aspects of education in China. The result is that Chinese students can master and memorize incredible amounts of knowledge and information and are excellent at preparing for exams, but lack the ability to critically think, develop their own opinions, and engage in creative activities. One former teacher pointed out:

*Because of the emphasis on the exam, teachers are more concerned with student exam scores rather than other important aspects, such as morality, character, emotion, thinking . . . we often reflect about why we can do so well on exams but cannot win Nobel Prizes . . . it is a tragedy—such a large population, so little creative thought.*

The CEE presents teachers with a difficult dilemma. They want to provide quality-oriented education—including the development of higher-level thinking skills, creativity, and concerns about moral education. Further, they believe that they are “personally accountable for their students’ overall development as human beings” (Wenzhong and Grove 1991, 79). Given the implications of high-stakes testing on the lives of their students, however, teachers are torn between personal responsibility for their students’ CEE preparation and success and providing students with a quality-oriented education. Accomplishing both seems impossible within the current system.

The Chinese fixation with exams affects students’ view of learning. Students become study machines, their world centers around preparing and passing exams, and they develop indifference toward knowledge. When teachers attempt to introduce new information or thinking skills, students often resist because they don’t believe it will help them prepare for the exam.

Teachers’ salaries are linked directly to the performance of their students. This merit pay system, based on students passing exams, reduces education to teaching to the test. Little else matters because a teacher’s salary, reputation as a good teacher, and status are determined by student performance on exams.

## The Changing Chinese Student

When discussing teachers’ challenges, this study’s participants were quick to express concerns related to China’s one-child policy. China now is facing the consequences of the policy implemented by the government in 1979 in an attempt to control the growing population. In Beijing, the media frequently boasts the policy’s success in reducing poverty and raising living standards while preventing nearly 300 million births over the past 25 years. However, there are consequences.

The policy has led to the development of what is coined the “xiao huangdi” or little emperors—only children who are pampered, spoiled, and have their every need met by both parents, two sets of grandparents, and unprecedented economic prosperity. From this researcher’s experiences in China, it was evident that the little emperors lead and parents follow. For example, Chinese children influence their parents 86 percent of the time when choosing toys and leisure-time activities; in a typical urban Chinese family, children influence purchases 69 percent of the time, compared to about 40 percent in the United States (Crowell and Hsieh 1995).

Basically, Chinese children get what they want, are seldom disciplined, and are accustomed to influencing their surroundings. More important, this habit of influencing and getting one’s way is not left at the classroom door. One experienced teacher participating in the study shared:

*Chinese students are different today. Not all of them, but many, are not well-behaved. In China, the parents follow the children instead of the children following the parents. The child often is in charge, and parents never discipline or criticize the child. It is difficult for teachers to punish the children, and most of the students are not taught these things at home. Most of the children think, like their parents, the teacher should follow the children. If teachers criticize or punish, the students do not know how to handle this well, and conflicts occur.*

The little emperors have been raised as if they were the center of the world, and they think differently than previous generations. They consider their parents and Chinese culture to be old-fashioned and oppressive. They are frustrated with a defective educational system that forces intense competition and eliminates social life and freedoms. Being raised with previously unseen consumer choice, they have a strong desire for the coveted middle-class lifestyle, and they view traditional Chinese values (including values that govern schooling) as no longer working and in dire need of change.

Many Chinese worry that the lack of discipline and the pampering of children prevents the youth from being exposed to the realities of life and is fueling a rebellious attitude among some youngsters (Guihua 2002). Movius (2002) pointed out that Chinese children are

*struggling to define themselves and their options in aggressive consumer terms. The demanding ‘me first’ attitude of the little emperors means their rebellion is primarily selfish, indifferent to higher ideological or political goals, but that selfishness presents a challenge to the still communal norms of Chinese society.*

Clearly, this spoiled and self-centered Chinese student can clash with Chinese teachers and the traditional norms of education and society. Today, Chinese teachers direct their energies to classroom management, unmotivated students armed with negative attitudes, laziness, and students unable to accept criticism. Though these concerns might seem trivial compared to student behavior that teachers face in the United States, these problems are unfamiliar to Chinese educators and represent a challenge to the traditional view of teaching and authority.

In China's increasingly competitive society, parents are primarily concerned with their child's success in later life and desperately seek to provide him or her with an edge over the competition. With only slightly more than 10 percent of high school students in China being admitted to the university (Guihua 2002), parents heavily invest in their child's education, which is rightfully viewed as a ticket to a better life. Further, parents believe that their child's performance reflects on them; they fear that their child's failure might cause them to "lose face" or suffer embarrassment.

Because education is so important and the competition for college admission is intense, parents raise expectations for schools—causing extreme and often contradictory demands on teachers. In the past, parents were reserved; but today, parents are more vocal and willing to pressure and blame teachers. One participant expressed this concern:

*Parents criticized the teacher if their children did not pass the exam; but teachers are also criticized because students have not developed their power of imagination (creative thinking) or their thinking skills. How can I do both—get students to pass the exam and meet all their other needs? But parents want this for their only child. This is great pressure.*

Chinese parents often make financial sacrifices to give their child the best opportunities and ensure his or her educational success. This type of parenting, along with the intense drive and competition for college admission, can cause parents to develop a distorted perspective of their child's abilities, interests, and performance. In the parents' eyes, their little emperor does nothing wrong. If failure occurs, blame is placed on schools and teachers, not on the child.

## Working Conditions

From an American's point of view, the working conditions of Chinese teachers and those of American educators have little in common. Whether comparing class sizes, salaries, access to resources such as computers, or the physical

conditions of schools, vast differences exist between most American and Chinese classrooms. Chinese teachers have no access to education associations to protect teachers' rights, no collective bargaining agreements, and little opportunity for professional development. Chinese graduate students in the School of Education were amazed to learn about the comparatively small size of the typical American classroom, relatively higher U.S. teachers' salaries and benefits, and the overall pleasant working conditions that most American teachers receive—all of which are absent in the Chinese teaching profession.

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## Low Salaries and Heavy Workloads

According to 2003 statistics, the average annual salary of Chinese primary and middle school teachers was 13,300 Renminbi (rmb) per year or 1,108 rmb per month (*People's Daily Online* 2004). That is the equivalent of \$1,621 U.S. dollars (USD) each year or \$135 USD per month. Low salaries are a major issue facing Chinese teachers, along with the shortage of qualified teachers. Low salaries are a burden on teachers' personal and economic lives. Financial pressures cause emotional stress and force some good teachers out of the classroom.

The salaries of Chinese teachers vary according to the quality of the school and the geographical location. For example, teachers at "key schools" (schools considered to have the highest quality teachers, to be the best in the city, and to play a leading role in the school system) secure higher salaries and also have the opportunity to receive additional income based on their students' performance on the CEE. However, these higher salaries seem to be the exception to the rule.

In addition to low salaries, the workload for teachers is great. Large class sizes, limited resources, and parental



pressures have forced teachers to work long hours and to provide lessons to students on weekends. In China, students often attend classes on Saturdays and Sundays to improve their English abilities, study an additional language, or develop in other areas such as piano or dance. When Chinese students go on break, classes are rescheduled to avoid missing valuable learning opportunities.

With the dream of being middle class now a possibility, the low salaries, changing students, and poor working conditions have made the teaching profession unattractive to many bright young Chinese students. To attract more students to the teaching field, the

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government has designated September 10 as Teachers’ Day, granted teachers pay increases, and made several teachers’ colleges tuition-free. Even so, with the changing conditions in the profession and the growth of economic opportunity, many students opt for more lucrative careers.

### **Large Class Sizes**

Most educators would argue that the number of students in a given class affects the learning process and outcomes. The larger the class, the less learning takes place, less teacher-student interaction, and less individualized attention. Though some American teachers could consider their class sizes as large, PRC classes are much larger by comparison. Class size is a major concern for both Chinese teachers and students.

Class sizes experienced by participants in the study varied, ranging from 35 to 97. One third-grade math class observed by this researcher had 38 students, while a third-grade English class had 68 students. In middle school, a class size of 90 students is common. With a 1.3 billion population, large class size seems unavoidable.

These experienced teachers rightly contended that large class sizes serve as a deterrent to teaching and learning. First, large classes reduce teacher-student interaction, limit one-on-one teaching, and play a role in silencing students. Students do not have opportunities to ask questions, and they are not encouraged to express their own ideas and perspectives. As one participant stated, “Chinese education, with the large number of students, oppresses students’ thinking and kills creativity.” Large class sizes, combined with an emphasis on exam preparation, reduce critical thinking and creativity to a merely nice educational ideal, and they leave most student questions unanswered. Students learn that asking questions is fruitless, and they may not develop good questioning skills.

Second, classroom instruction becomes ineffective. Not only do students fail to develop critical thinking skills and creativity, but also students who may be struggling do not receive needed attention. Ornstein and Levine (1997, 328) suggested that when classes are too large for low-achieving students, it is difficult for teachers “to provide sufficient help to overcome learning problems. This is particularly true with respect to critical thinking, reading comprehension, mathematics problem solving, and other higher-order skills.” Little, if any, one-on-one teaching occurs in these large classes, and this directly affects the quality of the instruction that struggling Chinese students receive.

Third, large classes increase the workload for teachers. A former elementary teacher stated, “Chinese teachers get tired with so many students—too much grading and too much extra work. They never get to enjoy free time or fun activities.” There is little doubt that the great number of students increases the chances of teacher burnout and likely plays a major role in teachers’ psychological problems.

Finally, an important concern is that large classes require teachers to spend more time on classroom management. “When you have so many students in class, it is difficult to control all of them and teach,” commented one study participant. Chinese teachers, facing a changing culture and students, are challenged to control the behavior of students in extremely large classes, and too much time is spent on controlling and management instead of teaching.

### **Increased Psychological Problems**

In 1995, the Shanghai government launched a project to study the psychological health of teachers. As participants in the study, 3,055 elementary school teachers took part in psychological testing. The results revealed that 48

percent had psychological problems, with 12 percent of those teachers displaying obvious psychological symptoms; in 2 percent of those cases, the problems were considered serious (*Shanghai Star* 2004).

A recent nationwide survey, conducted jointly by SINA.com and the *Beijing Morning Post*, demonstrated that 59 percent of 4,739 teachers who responded reported symptoms of bad health; they often felt fatigue, headaches, and had trouble getting to sleep (*Shanghai Star* 2004). Only 2.8 percent of the teachers surveyed said that they never had such problems. The survey also found that 72.5 percent of the teachers reported they were overstressed at work. Considering that many psychological problems can result from long-term suffering, the daily pressures on teachers seem to be intensifying.

Why do teachers have these problems? Participants in this study maintained that Chinese teachers are suffering from the worries and pressures brought about by a rapidly changing culture and a change in people's attitudes and thinking. Chinese teachers find it difficult to uphold Chinese tradition successfully, which places on them a heavy burden of responsibility, while confronting changes in culture and thinking that have eroded traditional Chinese values and thinking.

## Discussion

In addition to the problems discussed previously, Chinese teachers are faced with limited funding, questions regarding the availability of new technologies, and concerns about the quality of teacher education. Some of the problems that Chinese teachers experience may seem familiar to American educators—such as large class size, poor student attitudes, low salaries, and concerns over standardized testing. The bottom line is that educational problems are relative, and the causes, complexities, and consequences vary from culture to culture. For example, American teachers find a class size of 30 too large to allow for student interaction and individualized attention, while Chinese educators would welcome a class of 30 students that represents a more controllable group and manageable workload. Perhaps the nature of problem students in China seems mild compared to behavioral problems of some American students.

Yet, some common cross-cultural concerns and interests can be useful to American teachers. From the earliest proposals for American education, researchers and teachers have relied on both comparative and international perspectives to provide insight into education. Because today's world is one of an interconnected global economy of skills and ideas,

teachers need to understand how the processes of schooling vary across cultures and what implications are relevant for education in the United States.

Merryfield (1995) suggested that teachers need knowledge about the world in general, in addition to knowledge related to their content and profession. Gaining and using knowledge from other countries' educational systems provides American teachers with an opportunity to strengthen the U.S. educational system and bring new knowledge into the discussion about schooling. This knowledge provides fresh insight to educational decisions and programs, and promotes analysis of the contemporary system of education. The research presented here, for example, illustrates the pitfalls of high-stakes testing in China. Though the settings and stakes are different, this knowledge easily can be related and applied to the current U.S. educational climate that centers on accountability and testing.

## Closing Thoughts

When considering Chinese teachers and classrooms, several cultural factors should be kept in mind. First, China's communist form of government greatly differs from that of a democratic system. Second, the immense population in China has implications for the education system. Lastly, China has had a strong emphasis on tradition, including respect for teachers. As the Chinese economy and culture change, however, the needs of society also change. These changes place new demands and challenges on teachers. Not only will teachers need to adapt to these changes, but the educational system also must transform to meet the needs of the changing culture.

Though Chinese and American educational practices differ in significant ways, U.S. teachers could benefit from understanding how other countries adapt their educational systems to meet the challenges of economic and social changes. Armed with this knowledge, U.S. educators might discover new possibilities for improving American education. ■

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